MPR News | Minnesota Now Report: Residents of St. Paul encampment facing dangerous levels of toxins at site 01M64BXYTNVXR44PET3R3CNNB5

NINA MOINI: At least 300 people now live at what has become St. Paul's largest encampment. The site sits near the intersection of Randolph Avenue and Shepard Road. And it ballooned in size after the city cleared another encampment in August. As local leaders continue to grapple with what to do, residents say they're dealing with mounting health issues from the toxic chemicals found in the soil. Maddie Robinson reported on the situation for MinnPost, and she's here now to tell us more about what she found. Maddie, thanks for sharing your reporting with us. We appreciate your time.

MADDIE ROBINSON: Yeah, thanks for having me, Nina. I appreciate it.

NINA MOINI: What kinds of health impacts-- let's just start there-- are you hearing from the folks living at the site? What types of symptoms are they showing?

MADDIE ROBINSON: Yeah, for sure. So a couple of the people that my colleague and I, Shay Scanlan, we talked to, they were reporting issues with their respiratory system. We heard that their limbs were swelling up. These were people that had been living there for many years. We talked to one man who lived at the encampment on and off for about 15 years.

Also just other general injuries. There is a lot of trash and other things sticking up out of the ground as well. People were reporting that their feet-- a lot of times they don't have access to very good footwear, so their feet get cut up and injured. And then other people also said that if they sleep on the ground or if they spent extended periods of time on the ground, they would also just feel very sick afterwards. That's what people would report to us and would say had to do with the soil and the health of the land out there. So that's what we were hearing.

NINA MOINI: Some of the sites that people are able to come and set up tents and hundreds of people are able to be there, sometimes they tend to be at sites that may not have the best environmental quality to them. But you all went the extra mile, and you did tests on some of the soil samples from that Shepard and Randolph site. What did the results show? What did experts you spoke to say are some of the possible impacts of the toxins? It's hard to know what is causing what. So what did they say could be the potential impact?

MADDIE ROBINSON: Yeah. So we did three soil samples. So we went out to the site. We visited the encampment a few times, but that first visit, we went out there, we had our Ziploc bags and our spoons. And we were digging up soil in different parts. So the first sample was on the outskirts of the encampment, really close to those banks of the Mississippi River.

NINA MOINI: Sure.

MADDIE ROBINSON: Those levels weren't elevated. But then there was one on that main pathway of the encampment. When you get there, there's a huge path that leads you to other parts of it. We measured soil there. That was about 355 parts per million of lead levels. And one of the biology researchers that we spoke to at the University of Minnesota, no amount of lead is good. You don't necessarily want lead in the ground, but any kind of long-term exposure, she said, over 200 parts per million is a health risk.

If you are exposed to land with those higher lead levels above 200 parts per million, you will start to see some of those chronic health impacts. It can be on your neurological system, on your respiratory system. It's especially harmful for children and pregnant women. An outreach worker I talked to said that there are currently six pregnant women living at the encampment right now. And then the third soil sample we collected was closer to the center of the camp, and that was over triple that 200 parts per million threshold. It was about 646 parts per million. So a lot higher. It's very, very contaminated over there.

NINA MOINI: And Maddie, what did you learn about the history of the site and how it became so riddled with toxins?

MADDIE ROBINSON: Yeah. So it goes back a lot of decades when Shay and we were looking through a lot of different reassessment reports and just site reports in general. And we found that it used to be an old car scrapyard for a little over two decades, primarily in the '70s and '80s. But then for a little bit of the '60s as well, it used to be an old car scrapyard. The area, because it's so close to the Mississippi River, it's very prone to flooding. So the owner of the car scrapyard would actually fill the ground with things like glass and plastic and wood and asphalt to raise that ground level to prevent flooding. And because of that, a lot of that debris is still down there.

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, they've done a lot of different site visits and assessments, and they've found that type of material up to 16 feet under the ground. They've also found car parts. They've found battery casing fragments. They've found construction debris. When Shay and I went out there, a couple of the residents actually showed us some of the debris that's around, and there's just entire car parts and just other debris that's lying around or super deep in the soil as well.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, the situation there has grown too. We mentioned off the top of the segment here that it's grown in size because the city cleared another encampment, and a lot of people chose to move over to this other area. I mean, there are other dangers that are present, hazards that are present. We know that there is a lot of debate and talk right now around what is the best way to move forward with particularly this encampment site in the city of St. Paul.

We've learned from the city just this week from Mayor Kelleher that they're assessing it. There didn't seem to be immediate plans for a clearing or a date. What have you heard? Who is responsible for this land? Will it be cleaned up? I mean, does this lead to a clearing of the encampment? It hasn't already been cleared knowing that this was contaminated, right?

MADDIE ROBINSON: And that's the golden question, is who is responsible? That is what Shay and I were trying to get to the bottom of because this has been a known contaminated site for many years. I mean, it was put on the state Superfund site list back in 1992.

NINA MOINI: '92, yeah.

MADDIE ROBINSON: '92, yeah. So it's been known about for a long time. And even the Environmental Protection Agency on the federal level, they got involved back in 2016 and did their own evaluation and said, yeah, this site really needs to get cleaned up, but nothing has really happened since then. So it is a question of who is responsible because normally, it is the MPCA. But when we talk to them, they were saying that it would be about $4 million to completely clean up this site and excavate a lot of this soil. This hasn't happened yet. They have requested funding from the legislature. They requested about $7 million from the legislature back in 2024. But that didn't make Governor Tim Walz's budget there.

When we spoke to a couple lawmakers, they said they haven't really heard anything about the city of St. Paul requesting any remediation funding or any project funding for this site either. So it's a lot of different parts of play. So the MPCA, they would be responsible for cleaning up the site, but then when they can't get access to the money, that also asks another question of why isn't this money getting allocated from the budget? And why aren't these entities asking for funding as well? So that's where we're at right now. I know with the winter months coming up, the city, they did just pass that resolution, and they're hoping to do that pause on encampment closures before potentially doing a sweep or potentially doing a closure. But yeah, we're kind of in a bit of a limbo right now.

NINA MOINI: Maddie, just lastly, what did the folks there say about just the contamination? And I mean, would this area be able to be cleaned up with an encampment site still actively there, or would it need to be cleared before moving forward with making any changes?

MADDIE ROBINSON: Yeah. So the residents that we talked to, I mean, they're all very well aware of the contamination. We know that they're there. But a lot of them were saying that their biggest, I guess, issue was that-- and this is another topic, is the housing situation and shelter in St. Paul. And I've done a little bit of reporting on the shelter situation.

NINA MOINI: They don't feel like there's a better option right now.

MADDIE ROBINSON: They don't feel like there's a better option. They say that they don't really have anywhere else to go because there's just not a lot of availability of shelter beds in St. Paul, which is another conversation. But yeah, they're all very well aware of the contamination. And they're just looking for these options to try to get out of there because it is detrimental to their health, they're saying, and a lot of these researchers are saying as well.

And yeah, the question of the sweep there, when I visited a couple other times, it was kind of a scramble upon hearing the news that the encampment might be getting swept soon-- or swept soon, excuse me. A lot of people are very nervous, and they're trying to get all their things together. They're trying to find other options. So I think they know that this is something that's going to be happening very soon.

NINA MOINI: So it will remain to be seen. Maddie, thanks for sharing your reporting, and we hope you'll join us again.

MADDIE ROBINSON: Yeah, well, thank you so much for having me, Nina. I appreciate it.

NINA MOINI: Thank you. Maddie Robinson is a community health reporting fellow with MinnPost.